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# A Town of Many Names

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## A Town of Many Names

When the steamboat *Red Rover* churned past the Grand Mascoutin Prairie on her way to Fort Armstrong in 1829, the passengers were "enraptured at the numerous and beautiful situations for dwelling houses" along the western shore. "Nature had done all — man nothing," Caleb Atwater recorded in his *Western Antiquities*. "Princes might dwell here, within a mile or two of each other, fronting the Mississippi and along it, and possess handsomer seats than any one of them can boast of in the old world."

Europeans lavished equally extravagant praise. Charles A. Murray, an English traveler and vitriolic critic of the mushroom settlements in the Black Hawk Purchase, was delighted with the land of the "Fire People" as he glided by on the steamboat *Heroine* in 1835. The Mississippi flowed in "one vast body unbroken by islands" along low-lying bluffs "clothed in all the majesty of the forest." According to Murray, "Autumn was here decked in all its glory, and in every variety of hue; the deep and solemn foliage of the nobler trees was relieved by the brilliant colours of the scarlet creeping-vines which were twined round their mighty limbs, and hung in festoons



forming natural bowers, wherein poets might dream, or dryads repose. Over all this enchanting scene, and over the wide expanse of water, the setting sun had cast his rosy mantle and bathed it in a flood of crimson light."

By June 1, 1833, the red man departed from the Black Hawk Purchase and the American pioneers came to stake out claims. During the summer Colonel George Davenport sent a Mr. Farnham and two assistants to establish a fur trading post at Sandstone Bluffs or Grindstone Bluffs, as the present site of Muscatine was then known. Farnham erected a two-room log cabin on the bank of the Mississippi at the foot of what is now Iowa Avenue. A prospector in 1834 declared Davenport's trading post was the only building in what is now Muscatine. Indeed, only two other cabins had been erected in Muscatine County that year: Benjamin Nye had located his claim at the mouth of Pine Creek, and Err Thornton erected his cabin on Muscatine Slough in Township Seventy-six.

Two settlements were made within the present limits of Muscatine in 1835. James W. Casey staked out a claim just below Davenport's trading post at the head of Muscatine Slough, intending to build a town called Newburg. He was the first actual settler in what is now Muscatine. Travelers on the Mississippi knew his place as "Casey's Landing" or "Casey's Woodyard." In the fall of 1835 Lieutenant Albert M. Lea, who had laid out



the town of Iowa at the mouth of Pine Creek, wrote the following account of "Kasey's" town-site. "The place possesses the advantages of an excellent landing, and of a fine back country; but the bluff, probably 200 feet high, approaches the river very abruptly, allowing little room for building below it, and rendering difficult the ascent to the level ground above. The contiguity of the swamps of the Muscatine Island and of Sturgeon Bay, will have a tendency to create much disease at this point. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, it must be a place of considerable trade; as it is the first place above Burlington, where a town can be built on the west bank of the Mississippi, thus leaving an interval between these two places of forty miles on the river."

A second settlement was made just above Casey's Landing. On February 20, 1836, Colonel John Vanatta and Captain Benjamin Clark bought George Davenport's trading post and claim for \$200. Situated in the heart of present-day Muscatine, the claim was one-half mile square, extending along the river a quarter of a mile on each side of Davenport's trading-post cabin.

In May, 1836, Colonel Vanatta employed Major William Gordon of Rock Island, a graduate of West Point and a civil engineer, to survey a town on their new claim, starting from the stick chimney at the west end of the 32-foot trading-post cabin. Measuring eighty rods southwest



from that point, Gordon encroached about twenty feet on Casey's claim, but this conflict was later settled by arbitration according to the claim laws. In 1840 a second survey of the town was made by George Bumgardner, the Muscatine County surveyor.

Originally the proprietors planned to adopt Casey's paper-town name of Newburg but finally agreed on Bloomington, probably in honor of Colonel Vanatta's birthplace in Indiana. In August, 1836, John H. Foster and Suel Foster paid Captain Clark \$500 for his remaining one-sixth interest in the townsite. About the same time Moses Couch, Charles H. Fish, T. M. Isett, Adam Funck, Robert C. Kinney, William St. John, G. H. Hight, and J. W. Neally bought claims. Meanwhile, the rivalry that had sprung up between Casey's Landing and Bloomington was cut short by the untimely death of Mr. Casey.

At the close of the tenth year of the corporate existence of Bloomington, on June 6, 1849, about two hundred citizens filed a petition with Richard Cadle, clerk of the district court, asking that the name of the municipality be changed from Bloomington to Muscatine. Several reasons were given for the reform: the frequent miscarriage of mail to towns of the same name in Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois; the confusion between Burlington and Bloomington by postal authorities; and finally because the new name fitted "one of



the most noted and conspicuous landmarks" on the Mississippi and was not duplicated anywhere else. The petition was granted by Judge James Grant on June 7, 1849.

The change from Bloomington to Muscatine met with almost universal satisfaction. "The name we now bear is the aboriginal one for this locality," declared the Bloomington *Democratic Enquirer* of June 9, 1849. "It means Fire Island and was applied to the large island just below the city. It is also the name of our large, rich and rapidly populating county. It has euphony and originality and is peculiar to ourselves, not being found anywhere else on the map of the world."

The *Muscatine Journal* of June 9th expressed similar gratification. "We are aware that it will take some time to familiarize every one with the new name — but we think one year will suffice to obliterate the name of Bloomington as associated with our town from the mind of almost every one. The truth is, the town should never have been called by the name of Bloomington. There is a Bloomington in seven or eight of the States, we are confident, and in how many more we know not. Our citizens have been continually perplexed and disappointed at not receiving their letters and papers from abroad at the time they ought to reach here by due course of mail, and many important letters and documents have been given up for lost — when, lo! they would arrive here — marked



'Missent and forwarded.' Sometimes they would be forwarded from Bloomington, Indiana; sometimes from a town of the same name in Illinois — from the Bloomfields, the Burlingtons, the Bloomingtons, Bloomingtons, and every other town in the United States that was in 'Bloom.' This great source of difficulty is now, we trust, removed. Muscatine is an Indian name — there is nothing else like it that we know of in any other state. It is euphonious, easily remembered, easily spelt, and very appropriate. It is the name of our county, and we predict that Muscatine, Iowa, will yet make a figure in the world."

In the years that followed Muscatine was "easily remembered" for the picturesque charm associated with the name. The famous English statesman Richard Cobden was delighted as his steamboat approached Muscatine one bright summer afternoon in 1855. "When the boat came around that point above, and the amphitheater of your town appeared in view, with the sight of those beautiful residences suspended by the high bluff above the river, I thought the picturesque Rhine had not the equal of that picture."

Just as Charles A. Murray reveled in the beauties of a Muscatine sunset, so Mark Twain recalled the remarkable benedictions at the close of day. "And I remember Muscatine — still more pleasantly — for its summer sunsets," he wrote years after he had left the town. "I have never



seen any on either side of the ocean that equalled them. They used the broad smooth river as a canvas, and painted on it every imaginable dream of color, from the mottled daintiness and delicacies of the opal, all the way up, through cumulative intensities to blinding purple and crimson conflagrations which were enchanting to the eye but sharply tried it at the same time. All the Upper Mississippi region has these extraordinary sunsets as a familiar spectacle. It is the true sunset land. I am sure no other country can show so good a right to the name."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN